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## "KATE: A COMEDY."\*

THE dean of American dramatists, Mr. Bronson Howard, after a regrettable silence of several seasons, has composed a new comedy, entitled "Kate." This play he has published in advance of its production, breaking thus the habit of a lifetime. Hitherto only two of Mr. Howard's many successes have been published, "Saratoga" and "Young Mrs. Winthrop"; and these only in acting editions, illegible to him who runs as he reads. Realizing that the appeal of the printed page is less vivid than the appeal of theatrical production, Mr. Howard has taken pains, in preparing "Kate" for the press, to do all in his power to aid the reader to visualize the action of the piece. Mr. Bernard Shaw, to be sure, with his careful descriptions of scenes and characters and his quaintly thorough stage directions, made us realize some time ago that the publication of a play was in itself a delicate feat of literary art; but Mr. Howard has gone far beyond him in suppressing those intrusive technicalities that distract the attention of the average reader from the movement of the story. At the first glance, his book looks like a novel. Instead of stage directions, the reader is given passages of description and narrative that make him really see the people of the story and the setting in which they live and move. The lines are not labelled with the names of the characters that speak them; the business is indicated by narrative, rather than expository, means; and the reader finds to his astonishment that the whole play is acting itself before his mind's eye without demanding any exercise of his own contributive imagination. The book, therefore, is likely to attract that large class of novel-readers that hitherto has shuddered away from the mental task of reading plays. As an experiment in publication, the venture is a surprising success; and this success makes us hope that Mr. Howard may be led to prepare similar reading versions of some of his earlier plays.

The present comedy handles a timely subject with that sincerity of purpose and that honesty of execution which are constant qualities of Mr. Howard's work. The first three acts take place in England, and the fourth act in New York; and the basis of the story is a prospective marriage of the sort that

\* "Kate: A Comedy in Four Acts." By Bronson Howard. New York and London: Harper and Brothers.

American newspapers are fond of calling "international alliances." Kate is a New York society girl with wealth; Archibald Pengrue, Earl Catherst, is an English nobleman without it: and their families prepare a fair exchange of fortune for nobility. There is no love between them. Archibald really loves Bianca Dunn, a wild-blooded girl that he has played with as a child; and Bianca returns his love with passionate intensity. She is, however, blessed with neither lineage nor fortune; and she loves the Earl too well to stand in the way of his advancement. Kate, on her side, has been unable to stamp out of her mind the image of a man whom she has met at Nice a year before. This man, Lord John Vernor, was at that time a gay and reckless army officer; but he has since entered the Church, to retrieve his wrecked finances by accepting a comfortable living at three thousand pounds a year. The Reverend Lord John has not forgotten the girl he met at Nice; but, in his desire to reform his life, he has become engaged to the Honorable Dorothea Catherst, a demure and sanctimonious maiden. Thus, at the beginning of the play, each of the main characters finds himself in a false position. For financial, for social, or for religious reasons, each is lying to the world and to himself; and each is driving himself toward a marriage of expediency with a person that he does not love.

The play proceeds with an interchanging clash of character on character that results finally in the triumph of the truth. At first there is a misunderstanding between Kate and Lord John. Believing that he despises her because of the loveless engagement she has entered into, Kate persuades herself that she hates him; until Lord John saves her life at the risk of his own, and Kate, while attending him through the delirium resultant from his accident, kisses him on the lips, and learns. The love of Archibald and Bianca grows to its natural consummation. Bianca, to permit Archibald to marry Kate, throws herself into a mill-race, but is rescued. Kate understands that Bianca is hopelessly in love, but thinks it is with the Reverend Edward Lyell, Lord John's curate, to whom the girl had once been engaged. Dorothea understands nothing. Half an hour before Kate is to marry Archibald, he sends word to her by Lord John that Bianca has born a child to him. The truth triumphs. Archibald marries Bianca; and Kate becomes engaged to Lord John Vernor. Dorothea has already married Mr. Lyell.

This hasty exposition of the plot can give no suggestion of the dignity with which the theme is handled. Throughout the play, Mr. Howard insists upon the thesis that marriage is not a matter of legal or religious contract, but a matter of love. As soon as a man and a woman have given themselves sincerely to each other because of love, they are married in the sight of God; and no legal or religious ceremony can make a man and a woman married unless they have so rendered up their bodies and their souls. In the last act, Kate cries out:

"If Archibald and I should kneel together at the chancel-rail! The blessing of the Church would rest upon our union and Bianca Dunn would be lying in her bed with his child by her side. Which of us would be his wife?—and which his mistress?—in the eyes of God!"

But throughout the drama runs a deeper theme, perhaps subconscious with the author. What we call "Society" is to a great extent an organized system of life-lies. For the sake of wealth or position, men and women are tempted to pretend to the world and to themselves that they are other than they really are. They try to show themselves capable of baseness that is not really native to them, and shelter their perfidy behind an armor of light laughter. But, in the great passionate crises of their lives, the truth is beaten into them, and they learn unwillingly what has been so ably expressed in that sentence of *The Pilgrim's Scrip*—"Expediency is man's wisdom: doing right is God's." This is the lesson that each of Mr. Howard's people learns in this four-act comedy of "*Kate*."

The play proceeds on a plane of high comedy throughout; but the theme is one that might have been used for sterner drama, or even for profoundest tragedy. Given these people, each tangled in his special life-lie, Henrik Ibsen would have shattered them with punishment. Mr. Henry Arthur Jones or Mr. Arthur Wing Pinero would have driven them finally to compromise between the lie and the truth; and then Mr. Jones would have preached, or Mr. Pinero would have cynicized, about the compromise. In lifting the play to the plane of comedy, and showing how the characters succeed gradually in attaining truth, Mr. Howard exhibits a sanity of optimism rare indeed in the drama of the present. We have been told too often in our plays how men and women sink to ruin, or niggardly contrive to save their

skins through compromise. Here is a play that tells us how men and women realize themselves, and thus are saved.

Technically, this drama is interesting because it stands at the culmination of its author's long career. Mr. Howard's plays have always exhibited a craftsmanship on a par with the best dramatic accomplishment of their time. But most of them were written many years ago, at the time of stage conventions now outworn. The aside and the soliloquy, both reflective and constructive, and those other labor-saving devices of a former generation, were used by Mr. Howard in the plays of his earlier period, just as they were used by Mr. Pinero in his early farces. For this reason, plays as good as "The Henrietta" and "The Banker's Daughter" seem old-fashioned in form when they are revived by stock companies to-day. But Mr. Howard's art has grown with this growing age. His workmanship in "Kate" is rigid and compressed: there are no soliloquies or asides. As in Ibsen's later pieces, much of the action takes place off the stage, and the play concerns itself not so much with exhibiting the main events of the story as with exhibiting the effect of these events upon the characters. That Mr. Howard, thus late in his career, should entirely revise his methods of construction in order to keep pace with the progress of the stage is a striking indication of that thoroughness which has always been apparent in his work.

"Kate" requires for its presentation a company of even excellence throughout—such a company as is seldom aggregated nowadays in our American theatres. But it is to be hoped that the play may shortly be produced by a cast of the required competence. Meanwhile, it is fortunate that we may read it in book form. It is pleasing as an entertainment, and profitable as a criticism of life.

CLAYTON HAMILTON.

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"THE BREATH OF THE RUNNERS."

WHAT is it the American novel lacks? We hear the question continually, and the answers are various. An historic setting, background, atmosphere, art—the lack of all these makes for the peculiarly harsh angularity of the American product. When "The Divine Fire" appeared, a critic of high standing said: "The sad part of it all is that it could not be an American novel; it has the charm, the fulness, the ripe beauty of centuries